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Proverbs: Wisdom of the Ages in Contemporary Literacy Instruction

Bonnie Johnson, Ph.D.

Abstract — Proverbs, sayings that give advice or offer insights about life, are found in all countries and cultures. They are used in societies with writing systems and in those whose communications rely on oral traditions. Proverbs are concise, some rhyme, several use alliteration, and many are metaphorical. They can be found in ancient and contemporary literature. This article discusses the multicultural nature of proverbs and gives examples from various locales. The article also illustrates how proverbs lend themselves to interdisciplinary literacy integration. The use of proverbs in implementing specific grade-level Common Core State Standards is addressed. Resources for proverb study are suggested throughout the article, and two appendices are included for additional information on the topic.

Wolfgang Mieder, today's foremost paremiologist (i.e., proverb scholar), observed:

In a world getting smaller through new technological advances almost every day, communication with new individuals and groups of people increases steadily....In modern business and politics the understanding of proverbs plays a major role, often being the key to the success or breakdown of communications. It is a known fact that interpreters at the United Nations prepare themselves for their extremely sensitive job by learning proverbs of the foreign languages, since politicians often argue or attempt to convince their opponents by the use of a native proverb. No matter how sophisticated the debate, eventually every heated exchange can be reduced to an emotional war of proverbs. (Mieder, 1986, pp. x, xi).

Nearly 30 years after Mieder's statements, recent Internet sites reveal that one need not be in the political area, the corporate office, or the United Nations to encounter proverbs or variations of proverbs. The Denver Public Library's 2013 Movie Blog carries the title, "Don't Judge this Book by Its Movie," a variant of *Don't judge a book by its cover*. "If the Shoe Fits," a clipped version of *If the shoe fits, wear it*, is a shoe store in Frederick, Maryland.

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"Where There's Smoke, There's Fire" is a CD by Buckwheat Zydeco, and citizens and visitors to Baltimore can eat in the restaurant "Birds of a Feather," a clipped version of *Birds of a feather flock together*. A cartoon in "The New Yorker" (January 2, 2012, p. 58) shows a large group of people wearing chef hats and carrying kitchen utensils at a family's front door. One of the cooks says to the woman at the door, "We've come to spoil the broth," a reference to *Too many cooks spoil the broth*. Johnson, Johnson, and Schlichting (2012) pointed out, "Figurative expressions [such as proverbs] are a part of modern Americans' vocabulary" (p. 210), and McArthur (1996) noted that the "persistence" of proverbs "indicates their sociolinguistic importance" (p. 736).

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROVERBS

A *proverb* is a saying that provides advice or offers an insight about life. Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), author of *Don Quixote*, wrote that proverbs are "short sentences drawn from long experiences." For a saying to become a proverb, it must endure the test of time and therefore fit aptly when summing up or commenting on common human experiences and feelings. Proverbs, in written language, can be traced to antiquity. In groups without writing systems, they have been passed on through oral communication.

Proverbs are concise—not wordy or structurally complicated (e.g., *Actions speak louder than words*, *Let sleeping dogs lie*, *Better late than never*). Their brevity fits well in today's whirlwind pace of living. Many proverbs rhyme. This characteristic helps the reader, speaker, writer, and listener to remember them. Examples include *Health is better than wealth*, *No joy without annoy*, and *Haste makes waste*. Proverbs such as *Much coin, much care*; *Live and learn*; *Practice makes perfect*; *Never say never*; and *Travel teaches tolerance* use alliteration which also serves as a memory aid.

Many proverbs are metaphorical. In addition to its literal meaning, *April showers bring May flowers*, means that although times may seem bad now, there are better days ahead. Although actual milk may have been spilled, *Don't cry over spilled milk* is intended to advise the readers or listeners that they shouldn't worry about things that they cannot change. *You can lead a horse to water,*

but you can't make it drink reminds us that we can show someone the benefits of taking a particular course of action, but we cannot make that person follow our wishes.

Some proverbs in use today are surprisingly old. *An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure* and *First come, first served* are from the 1200s; *Time heals all wounds* and *Easy come, easy go* date back to the 1300s; *Still waters run deep* can be traced to the 1400s; *Feed a cold, starve a fever* and *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder* are from the 1500s; and in the 1600s, *Business before pleasure*, *Let bygones be bygones*, and *Where there's a will, there's a way* were in use (Johnson, 1999).

There are proverbs that contradict other proverbs because, as Johnson and Johnson (2011) pointed out, "People often alter their views or actions to accommodate life's circumstances" (p. 136). Berman (1997) stated, "Simply put, the message conveyed by contradictory proverbs is that *life is contradictory* and that what is true or good or wise is true or good or wise only in a certain context, only under certain circumstances" (xx). Examples of contradictory proverbs include:

- * *Look before you leap;*
- * *Those who hesitate are lost;*
- * *Absence makes the heart grow fonder;*
- * *Out of sight, out of mind;*
- * *Better safe than sorry;*
- * *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

RATIONALE FOR USING PROVERBS IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Proverbs are multicultural and global.

Working with proverbs in literacy instruction serves many functions. They are natural connections to ELL students. Researchers such as Mieder (1986), de Lay (1998), and Gleason (1995) have compiled thousands of proverbs from around the world. Mieder's book alone has 18,520 international, multicultural proverbs. From Albania to Zanzibar, all countries and cultures have proverbs. Appendix A lists proverbs from 24 global locales. Here are six additional examples:

- India:** *Learning is a treasure no thief can touch.*
- Japan:** *Lazy people have no spare time.*
- Mexico:** *Though a cage may be made of gold, it is still a cage.*
- Nigeria:** *Those who are being carried don't realize how far the town is.*
- Sudan:** *A big chair does not make a king.*
- Tanzania:** *Do not mend your neighbor's fence before seeing to your own.*

A study of multicultural proverbs reveals many commonalities among peoples because we all belong to the human family. Brock (1988) wrote, "When it comes to matters of the heart and soul...we the people of the world think alike. Not only that we always have. 'A liar should have a good memory,' says a Roman sage to his

dinner guests. Nearly two thousand years later we nod in agreement" (p. 10). Johnson and Johnson (2011) pointed out commonalities among international proverbs: "Some proverbs from different countries have similar meanings. For example, *When the cat goes away, mice reign* (African, Swahili); *When the cat is gone, the mice come out to stretch themselves* (Chinese); and *When the cat's away, the mice will play* (English) mean that when there is no threat, people tend to act more freely" (p. 137).

The United States is rich in proverbs. *The Soul Would Have No Rainbow if the Eyes Had No Tears* (Zona, 1994) is a book of Native American proverbs. Acknowledged contributors to Zona's collections include The American Indian Heritage Foundation, The American Indian Lore Association, Blue Cloud Abbey, Chief Serpent's Tail, Chief Standing Bear, The Council for Indian Education, Eastern Shawnee Tribe, Eastern Shoshone Cultural and Resource Center, and Pride Runs Deep. Zona stated:

If you want to know a people, the saying goes, know their proverbs. Proverbs often serve as a means of instruction in the rules of conduct and ethical behavior expected by all members of a society; what makes them an effective tool is that they are based on a keen observation of human nature and behavior rather than an idealized and unrealistic standard. (Preface)

The following Native American proverbs are found in Zona's collection:

- Arapaho:** *Easy money breeds indolence*
- Crow:** *One has to face fear or forever run from it*
- Hopi:** *Do not allow anger to poison you*
- Nez Perce:** *Every animal knows far more than you do*
- Omaha:** *It is easy to be brave from a safe distance.*

A Dictionary of American Proverbs (Mieder, Kingsbury, & Harder, 1992) is a monumental compilation of proverbs—15,000 of them—that are in use in the United States. According to Mieder and his colleagues who edited the volume, the work took 50 years to complete. Field workers gathered over 150,000 "citation slips" of proverbs and proverbial-related sayings. The slips, after sorting, yielded 75,000 "true proverbs." Margaret Bryant, a Chairperson of the Committee on Proverbial Sayings of the American Dialect Society, directed the project. The following proverbs were found in use by the researchers:

- California:** *Behind the clouds, the sun is shining.*
- Indiana, New York, South Carolina:** *It is better to suffer injustice than to do it.*
- Iowa:** *You can't be a howling success simply by howling.*
- Louisiana:** *To know everything is to know nothing.*
- New Jersey:** *The value of money lies in what we do with it.*
- Wisconsin:** *The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is the way you use them.*

For those interested, the *Dictionary of American Proverbs* contains 14,994 more entries.

Some groups within the United States have their own proverbs. For example, the Creole culture gave us *Don't*

call the alligator “big mouth” until you have crossed the river; Don’t ignore the small things—the kite flies because of its tail and Someone who speaks about “my inferiors” doesn’t have them are Hawaiian in origin (de Ley, 1998).

Immigrants brought their proverbs to America, but in addition to Native American proverbs, there are numerous proverbs that originated in America. In the long history of proverbs, some are relatively recent. These include: *The truth hurts* (1956); *What goes around, comes around* (1974); and *If it isn’t (ain’t) broke, don’t fix it* (1977). Other made-in-America proverbs are found in Appendix B.

Proverbs lend themselves to interdisciplinary literacy integration.

Literacy professionals sometimes detect resistance when subject-specific educators are told that they must integrate literacy instruction into their courses of study. Proverbs naturally fit into this integration. There is investigating to be conducted when the realm of proverbs meets science—especially when the proverbs are taken literally. For example, does *one rotten apple spoil the barrel*? According to Anton (1996), yes. If one apple produces the chemical ethylene, other apples in close proximity detect this production. The neighboring apples also begin to produce ethylene and rot is the eventual outcome.

Do *early birds catch the worm*? They sometimes do if the worm is out before the sun shines. Sun dries out earthworms, so they do not tend to be seen during daylight hours. Only an unusually early bird would be fortunate enough to catch a worm. Proverbs to investigate might include, *Lightning never strikes the same place twice*, *All that glitters is not gold*, *An elephant never forgets*, and many more.

Artists have incorporated proverbs into their works. For example, at Belvoir Castle, a visitor can view a painting that incorporates 45 proverbs; a French work of art depicts 71 proverbs (Flavell & Flavell, 1993). In the sports world, “*It’s not over till it’s over*” (Yogi Berra) and “*You can run, but you can’t hide*” (Joe Louis) are among many expressions used by sports figures that have become proverbs. It is difficult to find a discipline where proverbs cannot be linked, in some way, to its study. In an introduction to his dictionary, Titelman (1996), whose work took “...fourteen years of painstaking research in the ocean of proverbial wisdom” (p. xi), refers to his proverbs compilation as “...the laboratory of famous American writers such as Saul Bellow, Truman Capote, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Miller, ... Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Tennessee Williams, Tom Wolfe, and hundreds of statesmen, politicians, journalists, and ordinary people” (x).

PROVERBS IN THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

While the jury is still out on the impact that the Common Core State Standards will have on assisting educators as they plan and students as they learn, and although the Standards have their critics (see, for example, Layton, 2012), there is room for proverbs in implementing the Standards. Here are examples for Grades 1-12. Please note that proverbs comfortably fit into more than one category in most grade levels, but because of space considerations, only a few examples are given. Additional activities for working with proverbs can be found in resources such as *Words: The Foundation of Literacy* (Johnson & Johnson, 2011), and *Wordworks: Exploring Language Play* (Johnson, 1999).

Grade 1 ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2: Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.

Grade 2 ELA-Literacy.RL.2.2: Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.

As an early childhood classroom teacher for over a decade, the author often read Aesop’s fables to young pupils. The stories are short, usually involve animals (which appeal to children) as main characters, and have a clear, concise “moral” or central lesson. An example is “The Hare and the Tortoise” whose moral, *Slow and steady wins the race*, is a well-known proverb. Learning this “central lesson” serves children throughout their lives when they encounter the proverb in more sophisticated reading. For example, an article in a recent edition of Jackson, Mississippi’s newspaper, *The Clarion-Ledger* carries the title “Slow and steady wins the race: Patience a virtue when winter fishing” (Broom, 2013). An article in *Psychology Today* is entitled, “Slow-and-Steady Wins the Race: Especially with Diet and Weight” (Katz, 2012). Other proverbs that serve as morals in fables include *Little friends may prove great friends* (“The Lion and the Mouse”); *The more you have, the more you want* (“The Goose that Laid the Golden Egg”); *Think ahead* (“The Ant and the Grasshopper”), and more.

In Grades 3 and 4, the words “literal,” “nonliteral,” “figurative language,” and “proverbs” appear in the Standards.

Grade 3 - ELA-Literacy.RL.3.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language.

Grade 3 - ELA-Literacy.L.3.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings.

Grade 3 - ELA-Literacy.RI.3.3: Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.

Grade 4 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5b: Recognize and explain the meaning of common idioms, adages, and proverbs.

The prevalence of proverbs assures that students will encounter them in classroom reading. The metaphorical nature of many proverbs provides opportunities for discussing what the proverb says, that is, its literal interpretation, and what it can mean, that is, its inferential interpretation. *Don't count your chickens before they're hatched* is a proverb that most third and fourth graders, through guided discussion, could interpret figuratively. The proverb also would lend itself to a short science lesson. According to Anton (1996), not all eggs that chickens lay produce chicks. He explained, "In the wild, overproduction is a species' way of guaranteeing its survival, no matter how the environment changes. For instance, the ocean sunfish produces 300 million eggs. In a stable habitat, only two eggs would survive to adulthood—just enough to replace the parents. The same is true of the conger eel, which produces 15 million eggs, and the carp, which produces as many as two million" (p. 47).

As in the previous two grade levels, the Grades 5 and 6 Standards address "figurative meanings."

Grade 5 - ELA-Literacy.L.5.5b: Recognize and explain the meaning of common idioms, adages, and proverbs.

Grade 5 - ELA-Literacy.RL.5.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.

Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Robert Peter Tristram Coffin wrote:

Proverbs are not merely decorations on life. they have life itself in them. they are the bedrock substance of living, built up by many people and many years. they are the beginnings of all literature, the first metaphors and similes, the first comedies and tragedies. they are the first poetry we have. (de Ley, 1998, p. 15) (Please note that except for the first sentence, sentence beginnings in the quotation do not use upper-case letters.)

As mentioned throughout this article, the use of metaphor is a characteristic of proverbs, and the discussion of proverbs—especially metaphorical proverbs—fits well into the Grade 5 Standards.

Grade 6 - ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

Grade 6 - ELA-Literacy.RI.6.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative and technical meanings.

Grade 6 - ELA-Literacy.RI.6.10: By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6-8

text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Proverbs are not difficult to locate in nonfiction. In Sam Watkins's (2011, first published in 1882) *Company Aytch*, a memoir of the Civil War, the author uses figurative language such as the idiom *red tape* (p. 164), and the proverb, *Strike while the iron is hot* (p. 242). A proverb associated with Abraham Lincoln, *Don't change horses in mid-stream*, was used by the President when he wrote in 1864 prior to his re-election bid:

I do not allow myself to suppose that either the convention or the League have concluded to decide that I am either the greatest or the best man in America, but rather they have concluded that it is not best to swap horses while crossing the river... (Flavell & Flavell, 1993, p. 136).

In Grades 6-8, "loaded language," "figurative meanings," and "alliteration" are used in the Common Core grade-level expectations.

Grades 6-8 - ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.6: Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

In his book *Conversations with Kennedy*, Ben Bradlee, former executive editor of *The Washington Post*, used a relatively new proverb, *Don't get mad, get even*, which originated in 1975. Bradlee wrote, "Some of the reasons have their roots in that wonderful law of the Boston Irish political jungle: 'Don't get mad; get even'" (Manser, 2002 p. 51). Nonfiction political texts and newspaper articles often contain proverbs that can support a writer's stance or contribute to a writer's use of "loaded language" such as "the Boston Irish political jungle."

Grade 7 - ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

Grade 7 - ELA-Literacy.RL.7.10: By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Literature abounds with proverbs. As Mieder (1986) pointed out, "...one finds Charles Dickens using proverbs with a high frequency to depict the social ills of his time. And Carl Sandburg used proverbs in his poems concerning the American melting pot of various national and immigrant groups" (x). Proverbs and their variants can be found in literary works from authors such as Mark Twain, Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*) Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*)—even from ancient Roman poets such as Ovid and Horace.

Grade 8 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

Many early American statesmen used proverbs in their speaking and writing. Their use of these figurative phrases established a tone that some might consider wise and others might consider efforts to be “folksy” and therefore appeal to the “common” citizen. Daniel Webster used the proverb *There’s always room at the top* and is credited with coining the proverb; George Washington used a variant of *The best defense is a good offense* in his writings (Manser, 2002).

As noted earlier in this article, proverbs and their variants can be found in all genres and difficulty levels of literature. From Shakespeare (*All that glitters is not gold*) to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (*All things come to those who wait*), from Sir Walter Scott (*Let sleeping dogs lie*) to F. Scott Fitzgerald (*Leave well enough alone*), proverbs enrich the literary experience and most likely will be encountered as students read literary works for the partial fulfillment of the Grades 9-10 and Grades 11-12 Standards.

Grades 9-10 - ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.10: By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 complexity band independently and proficiently.

Grades 11-12 - ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.10: By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

THE USE AND LONGEVITY OF PROVERBS

From ancient beginnings to contemporary newspaper articles, proverbs have been and continue to be a part of the world’s vocabulary. As an element of figurative language, they are a component of the Common Core State Standards. Proverbs are found in all genres of print—from great works of literature to Internet ads.

Johnson (1999) noted: Perhaps every culture has proverbs because it is characteristic of cultures to pass wisdom on from one generation to the next. Older, more experienced people often believe that they can save younger members of a group from some of life’s hard knocks. Proverbs are a clever way to attempt to do so (p. 104).

Johnson’s observation seems reasonable because, as Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.), the Roman statesman and philosopher wrote, “No person was ever wise by chance” (Mansoor, 1995, p. 175).

Appendix A - Proverbs from 24 Countries/Principalities/Provinces/Territories

Argentina: *A dog that barks all the time gets little attention.*

Bahamas: *Cunning is better than strength.*

China: *Big ships often sail on big debts.*

Denmark: *The most difficult mountain to cross is the threshold.*

England: *Better safe than sorry.*

France: *Common sense is not so common.*

Germany: *Good bargains empty our pockets.*

Haiti: *To stumble is not to fall.*

Iceland: *A sitting crow starves.*

Jamaica: *People who cannot dance blame it on the music.*

Kenya: *Seeing is different from being told.*

Lithuania: *It is easier to give orders than to work.*

Morocco: *Reading books removes sorrows from the heart.*

Nepal: *Opportunities come but do not linger.*

Oyambos*: *Small termites collapse the roof*

Peru: *You won’t catch trout without wetting your feet.*

Quebec: *Silk is best cut with old scissors.*

Romania: *There is no physician like a true friend.*

Scotland: *What cannot be cured must be endured.*

Turkey: *Where you were born is less important than how you live.*

Ukraine: *The morning is wiser than the evening before.*

Virgin Islands: *A new broom sweeps clean, but an old broom knows the corners.*

Wales: *The best candle is to understand.*

Xhosas*: *No one can paddle two canoes at the same time*

Yugoslavia: *No one likes to be the first to step on the ice.*

Zimbabwe: *Two experts never agree.*

*Note: “O” or an “X” represent groups as the author could not locate countries, principalities, provinces, or territories with proverbs for those letters; Ovambos are from southern Africa, and Xhosas are members of the Bantus of South Africa.

Appendix B - Proverbs that Originated in the United States

The best things in life are free.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

Don’t judge a book by its cover.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Money doesn’t grow on trees.

The apple never falls far from the tree.

Crime doesn’t pay.

Don’t bite off more than you can chew.

Talk is cheap.

To each her (his) own.

If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.

If the shoe fits, wear it.

*If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.**

You can’t unscramble eggs.

There’s always room at the top.

Let the chips fall where they may.

The show must go on.

Fish or cut bait.

Oil and water don’t mix.

Cream always rises to the top.

Let’s give credit where credit is due.

*Note: According to Manser, 2002, this proverb comes from Palmer’s 1840 *Teacher’s Manual*. The proverb was a part of a poem.

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